

# SCORP Public Engagement Methods Guide



*Photo by Allie McCreary, Auburn University*

## I. Introduction

The foundation for most SCORPs is public engagement: resident and provider surveys, focus groups, stakeholder interviews, and public workshops. These methods are the primary vehicle for identifying recreation issues and understanding what activities people participate in, what facilities they want improved, and what values should guide investment.

SCORP planners use public engagement to understand what residents value and where they want investment. These methods capture local knowledge, build public trust, and describe the “so what.” These methods should be combined with quantitative and spatial analysis to help answer questions about outdoor recreation from another perspective: Who lacks access to parks, trails, and water? Which communities have the greatest need? Where are the opportunities to fill those gaps? Together, the two approaches let planners move from “residents want more trails” to “here are the specific counties and municipalities that lack trail access, and here is how that gap breaks down by race and income.”

This guide focuses on public engagement to inform the demand analysis. While this is primarily qualitative data, some of it is quantitative such as surveys that quantify visitor spending or participatory mapping that identifies gaps in access. See the companion SCORP Data Methods Guide for data related to supply analysis. Note that the Data 101 information in the [Data Methods Guide](#) applies to qualitative methods as well. For conciseness, this information is not repeated in the Public Engagement Guide.

Table 1: Overview of Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

	Qualitative	Quantitative / Spatial Analysis
<b>What it measures</b>	Resident and provider values, preferences, and perceived needs	Physical supply of resources and population access gaps
<b>Key methods</b>	Surveys, focus groups, workshops, interviews	GIS mapping, service area analysis, demographic overlays
<b>Strengths</b>	Captures local knowledge; builds community trust	Identifies specific gaps; supports equity analysis; scalable
<b>Best used for</b>	Understanding demand and setting investment priorities	Understanding supply and identifying where investments are most needed

## II. Public Engagement Methods

Responsive planning starts with listening to people. These methods not only generate key insights into values, concerns, and priorities but can also build trust with the public.

### Advisory Groups

Accuracy and Statistical Validity	Spatial Resolution	Temporal Resolution	Operational Investment	Technical Difficulty	Burden on the Participant
Varies	Varies	Snapshot	High	Moderate	High

Advisory groups are typically made up of people who have specialized knowledge, experience, or information about a topic. They may include community members, technical experts, partner organizations, recreation providers, or business leaders. Many planning processes use youth advisory groups to ensure the perspectives of high school students and young adults are included. It is important to be clear about the decision authority of an advisory group. For example, are they reviewing and providing feedback on draft information prepared by the agency or are they sharing in decision-making and implementation?

#### Advantages

Advisory groups can provide in-depth knowledge and expertise about a topic or place that may be missing from the agency's or consultant team's backgrounds. They are highly invested in a process and can bring diverse and unique perspectives to the table.

#### Disadvantages

Advisory groups require significant time and effort from participants and facilitators. Clear and consistent communication about requirements, timelines, and the process are required for advisory groups to be most effective.

## Surveys

Accuracy and Statistical Validity	Spatial Resolution	Temporal Resolution	Operational Investment	Technical Difficulty	Burden on the Participant
Varies	Varies	Snapshot	High	Moderate	High

Surveys can tell us what recreation opportunities residents, providers and others currently know about and where there are gaps. Surveys are structured questionnaires used to collect information through various formats. Today's surveys are often conducted digitally with tablets onsite or via digital links to minimize data entry. Surveys are an excellent mixed methods tool that can produce both quantitative and qualitative data about user characteristics and experiences, as well as participation, activities, and access. Statistically-valid surveys require intentional design and implementation to reduce bias and produce randomized results (see Data 101 in the [Data Methods Guide](#)).

### Advantages

Surveys capture the "why" behind visitor desires and provide deep context for management decisions. Digital distribution of surveys is highly cost-effective and can reach a large number of people quickly.

### Limitations

Surveys have a high burden on respondents and can be expensive to design and implement well. Poor survey design may result in biased responses or lead to confusing and difficult-to-interpret results. On-site surveys can be labor-intensive and limited by staff availability and weather.

### Tips

There is both an art and a science to developing effective, unbiased surveys. Partnering with researchers and consultants is an excellent way to bolster survey design and implementation.

## Public Comments

Accuracy and Statistical Validity	Spatial Resolution	Temporal Resolution	Operational Investment	Technical Difficulty	Burden on the Participant
Low rigor	Varies	Snapshot	Low	Low	Low

Public comments can be a gold mine of substantive information if you focus on the relevant data. Consider reviewing public comments from past or related planning efforts to look for information that might be relevant to your current effort.

### Advantages

Public comments can directly identify residents and providers concerns and desires. When the agency is responsive to public feedback it fosters a sense of transparency and public trust.

### Limitations

Formal public comments are often skewed by highly vocal stakeholders and may not represent the interests of the general public. Comments can also be prone to misinterpretation when context is missing.

## Public Meetings & Community Workshops

Accuracy and Statistical Validity	Spatial Resolution	Temporal Resolution	Operational Investment	Technical Difficulty	Burden on the Participant
Moderate rigor	Varies	Snapshot	Moderate	Moderate	High

Nothing says “I’m listening” like showing up in person for dialogue with the community about a planning effort. Community workshops are interactive meetings where the public helps co-design a vision or goals for a planning effort. These events are an opportunity for interested parties and community members to dialogue with each other, as well as with the agency representatives, about what is important to them. These sessions can generate key qualitative and quantitative insights and even spatial data. Skilled facilitators can deploy a range of brainstorming techniques to generate key insights from participants. Once the workshop is over, follow-up is needed to share findings and take-aways back with the public to show that their voices have been heard.

## Advantages

Interactive workshops can accommodate many communication styles and build trust with participants. This format allows for dialogue across multiple perspectives and can generate a depth of qualitative and spatial information relevant to the project. In-person workshops also serve to build relationships among participants of various backgrounds and with governmental officials in attendance. These relationships can lead to enhanced trust.

## Limitations

Workshops can be time-consuming to organize and require skill to facilitate properly. Only a small fraction of people will be able to participate in such events, and therefore, the information generated will not be representative of the general population. Sometimes dialogue can be dominated by the loudest voices or groups that are highly organized, have in-depth knowledge, or have a particular stake in the proposed action.

## Tips

To get the most out of your workshop, make sure you have a clear plan for capturing data generated during facilitated activities. To maximize public participation, consider providing food and beverages or even childcare for participants. In communities where multiple languages are commonly spoken, provide translated versions of written materials and live translation where possible. Careful structuring of activities will allow all voices to be heard. Finally, it is imperative that participants have a strong understanding about how the information will be used.

## Community Events

Accuracy and Statistical Validity	Spatial Resolution	Temporal Resolution	Operational Investment	Technical Difficulty	Burden on the Participant
Moderate rigor	Varies	Snapshot	Low	Moderate	Low

Not everyone has the time, interest, or is comfortable attending community workshops or formal public meetings. Yet, they still may have a keen interest in what recreation opportunities are available to them. One way to reach what is often called the ‘missing middle’ is to set up a table or booth at a popular community event, such as a farmer’s market, fair, rodeo, pow-wow, outdoor industry exhibition, or other event where people are gathering. In addition to sharing information (brochures, handouts), the booth can provide an interactive opportunity to gather meaningful input from passersby using maps, games, or electronic media.

## Advantages

'Meeting people where they are' allows for information sharing and engagement with different audiences, including those who care deeply, but are otherwise too busy to attend a meeting as well as those with less exposure to public meetings. By piggy-backing off of existing community events, there is less need for targeted public outreach or marketing.

## Limitations

At community events, people may be juggling family members, fulfilling shopping lists, and balancing multiple priorities. Thus, it is important that activities are quick, interactive, and fun. The emphasis is less on volume of information gathered and more on outreach and encouraging interested people to follow-up later.

## Tips

Having colorful signs, give-away items, and mascots adds to the fun! Organizing games or activities for children (supervised by volunteers) allows adults to engage in short, targeted inquiries about their recreation priorities. Provide a business card with an online link (or QR code) to any survey or inquiry that may require additional time.

## Participatory Mapping

Accuracy and Statistical Validity	Spatial Resolution	Temporal Resolution	Operational Investment	Technical Difficulty	Burden on the Participant
Moderate rigor	Varies	Snapshot	Moderate	Moderate	High

Gather around a map and let people make their marks! Participatory mapping is an excellent way to enable residents, community members and recreation providers to tell us what places they value, what activities or benefits are important to them in these places, and to identify specific areas of opportunity or concern. Whether during a workshop or community event on paper maps or online via participatory GIS, generally some background data is collected about the participants (e.g. county of residence, age, gender, frequency of visitation) as well as specific points, areas, or routes of interest on the map. The resulting data will often be a heat map of areas of importance for various values that can inform planning and prioritization. Maps also can be generated to identify areas of concern due to high volumes, conflicting uses, public safety, or other factors.

## Advantages

Participatory mapping can generate rich qualitative and quantitative data, much like surveys, but with the added benefit of spatially explicit information. Participatory mapping results in spatial data about recreation activities, resource uses, and special places. This socio-spatial data layer can be integrated with other spatial layers (wildlife habitat, infrastructure, wildfire risk) to inform multiple planning processes.

## Limitations

Because the data is self-reported, it is susceptible to "cognitive bias" and memory errors. The quality of the data depends heavily on the characteristics, knowledge, and perspectives of the specific individuals who participate. Mapping also assumes that the participant is comfortable thinking spatially and reading maps.

## Tips

When doing participatory mapping, whether it is part of a community workshop, community event, or virtual activity, it is helpful to have experienced staff on hand to help participants navigate the map and find places that matter to them.

## Community & Participatory Science

Accuracy and Statistical Validity	Spatial Resolution	Temporal Resolution	Operational Investment	Technical Difficulty	Burden on the Participant
Moderate rigor	Site-specific	Snapshot	Low	Moderate	Moderate

Extend your field research by providing opportunities for visitors to contribute data. As technology advances, managers and researchers are increasingly finding new ways to collaborate with the public to fill data gaps. Community science not only generates data for your spreadsheets, but it also generates a sense of stewardship in visitors.

Some participatory methods include:

- **Chatbot-Facilitated Monitoring:** This approach invites visitors to text a number posted at a site or trailhead with information such as parking lot counts or trail conditions. Text-messaging chat bots can prompt visitors for clarity or additional information. Chatbots can work in areas without cell service by "bursting" data once the visitor returns to a signal.

- **Photo-Station Monitoring:** More commonly used for restoration monitoring, managers can install signage and a fixed bracket that invites visitors to position their phones or cameras toward an area of interest and submit their pictures to an online database, such as [Chronolog](#). This provides a way to conduct a low-cost longitudinal photo-point study to see changes over time.
- **Community Science Apps:** Planners can leverage data from platforms like eBird or iNaturalist to indicate resource conditions and areas used by those respective app users. While not designed for recreation, data generated from these apps act as proxies for where and when "nature-viewing" visitors are present.

### Advantages

These methods allow planners to solicit real-time data, allowing for an “early warning” system if data is monitored continuously. When people help collect the data, they may be more likely to support the management decisions based on that data.

### Limitations

People have variable skill levels for identifying conditions of interest and may generate inaccurate data. Volunteers tend to collect data where it is easiest to travel, leaving gaps in data in more remote areas. With app-based methods, there is a clear selection bias toward specific segments of the population (for instance birders who use iBird and those who might be more technically inclined). Chatbots require a high degree of technical skill to develop and maintain the software.

### Expert Interviews

Accuracy and Statistical Validity	Spatial Resolution	Temporal Resolution	Operational Investment	Technical Difficulty	Burden on the Participant
Moderate rigor	N/A	Snapshot	High	Moderate	High

Expert interviews are one-on-one dialogues designed to explore complex perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and specialized management history. This method allows planners to move past surface-level data to gain a deeper understanding of the "why" behind experiences and attitudes. Data is gathered through structured or semi-structured conversations that allow the interviewer to probe deeply into sensitive or complex issues. Some potential applications could include:

- **Historical Context:** Interviewing a long-time guide to understand how use patterns have shifted over decades.

- **Problem Solving:** Talking to specific users to identify the exact root of a conflict or a perceived management failure.
- **Program Design:** Using expert insights to shape the initial stages of a new recreation program or facility redesign.

### Advantages

Unlike a survey, you can ask follow-up questions like "Tell me more about that..." to uncover hidden insights. Interviews provide the most descriptive data possible regarding individual experiences and beliefs. This approach allows planners to tap into specialized knowledge that broader public engagement might miss.

### Limitations

Transcribing and analyzing individual interviews is time-consuming. Results are a "snapshot" in time and are prone to interviewer bias, which can inadvertently sway participant responses.

## Focus Groups & Panels

Accuracy and Statistical Validity	Spatial Resolution	Temporal Resolution	Operational Investment	Technical Difficulty	Burden on the Participant
Moderate rigor	N/A	Snapshot	High	Moderate	High

These are structured, facilitator-led "deep dives" with invited participants. These methods are an incredible tool for exploring complex feelings, testing new or controversial concepts, or understanding the lived experiences of specific user groups (e.g., adaptive hikers or local outfitters). Data is generated by conducting structured or semi-structured interviews, transcribing the session, performing thematic coding, and identifying recurring patterns, "pain points," and shared values across different participants. Some potential applications could include:

- **Barrier Identification:** Use a panel to find out why a specific demographic *isn't* visiting a site (e.g., "The signage feels unwelcoming" or "The permit system is too confusing").
- **Refining Surveys:** Conduct a focus group *first* to ensure your survey asks the right questions in the right way.

## Advantages

Unlike a 1-on-1 interview, a participant's comment often sparks a "lightbulb moment" or a counter-point from another, leading to richer data. Inviting interested parties to a panel shows that the agency values their specific expertise, building long-term trust.

## Limitations

A dominant personality can hijack the room. Professional facilitation is required to ensure the "quiet voices" are heard. Ultimately, this is non-probability data. You cannot say "70% of visitors feel this way" based on 10 people. It represents *depth*, not *breadth*. These methods require significant time for recruitment, logistics, and the labor-intensive analysis of transcripts.

### III. Summary of Engagement Strategies

Table 2. Overview of public engagement methods and strategies.

Method	Description	Engagement Strategies
<b>Community Advisory Groups</b>	A group of community leaders who meet regularly to provide input and guide the planning process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Recruit a demographically representative group</li> <li>● Partner with community organizations for outreach</li> <li>● Compensate members for participation</li> <li>● Provide childcare, transportation, and translation services</li> <li>● Establish clear expectations and consistent meeting cadence</li> </ul>
<b>Youth Advisory Groups</b>	A group of youth and young adults involved in shaping outdoor recreation priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Partner with schools, youth programs, and community organizations</li> <li>● Compensate members for participation</li> <li>● Use interactive and activity-based engagement</li> <li>● Schedule meetings outside school hours</li> </ul>
<b>Surveys</b>	Surveys gather input from a larger number of people and can be designed to target certain groups (i.e., current users, providers, general population).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Use the appropriate collection method based on the level of validity and reliability</li> <li>● Offer surveys in languages relevant to the target audience and avoid technical jargon</li> <li>● Provide multiple formats (mobile, paper, intercept, online)</li> <li>● Partner with trusted community organizations for distribution</li> <li>● Use targeted outreach to oversample underrepresented populations</li> </ul>
<b>Public Comments</b>	Open-ended feedback on draft or proposed planning documents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Maintain a list of interested parties, partners, other agencies, tribes, and others who may want to comment.</li> <li>● Avoid using public comment periods as the first interaction with people about SCORP planning.</li> <li>● Let people know how you will - or will not - use public comments.</li> </ul>
<b>Public Meetings &amp; Community Workshops</b>	Open meetings that provide opportunities for residents to learn about the planning process and provide input on gaps, priorities, and needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Host meetings in locations where people already gather</li> <li>● Offer multiple meeting times (evenings, weekends, virtual)</li> <li>● Provide childcare, food, and translation services</li> </ul>

Method	Description	Engagement Strategies
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Partner with trusted community organizations to co-host</li> <li>● Use multiple outreach methods (flyers, canvassing, social media, email)</li> <li>● Incorporate interactive activities</li> </ul>
<b>Focus groups</b>	Small-group conversations that gather in-depth qualitative input and add nuance to surveys and quantitative analysis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Partner with trusted community leaders or organizations to recruit participants</li> <li>● Conduct focus groups for specific populations (youth, rural residents, etc.)</li> <li>● Offer stipends or incentives for participation</li> <li>● Provide childcare, transportation assistance, and translation</li> </ul>
<b>Expert Interviews</b>	1:1 interviews to explore complex perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and specialized management history.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Conduct interviews with long-time residents and community leaders</li> <li>● Partner with local historians and community organizations</li> <li>● Gather oral histories and community stories</li> <li>● Acknowledge past harms and inequities in planning processes</li> </ul>
<b>Community Events</b>	Short, informal engagement conducted in public spaces or at community events to gather input from residents who may not attend meetings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Table at festivals, markets, and community events</li> <li>● Set up engagement in parks, trails, and recreation spaces</li> <li>● Use quick polls, mapping boards, or dot voting</li> <li>● Offer materials languages relevant to the target audience and avoid technical jargon</li> <li>● Staff with community ambassadors</li> </ul>
<b>Participatory Mapping</b>	Interactive way to gather input about specific places - issues, opportunities, gaps, etc. Can be done virtually or -in person and combined with workshops and community events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide maps with geographic or other key features</li> <li>● Encourage participants to use their own words</li> <li>● Use interactive elements such as drawing, sticky notes, and symbols</li> <li>● Have experienced facilitators to help guide the mapping activity</li> </ul>